

More money than taste in Lycia and Peckham

Cathy Mercer

Just outside the gallery in the British Museum which houses the Parthenon sculptures are the very striking remains of what we call the Nereid Monument: visitors cast a slightly puzzled glance at it as they hurry in to pay their respects to Pheidias' masterpieces. Few linger but all are surely struck by the sheer immensity of these remains: apparently an entire Greek temple reconstructed at one end of a gallery which is filled with masses of other sculpture.

In fact the Nereid Monument is a tomb belonging to an unknown chieftain from the city of Xanthus, in Lycia, in the south west of modern Turkey. A stroll round the Greek galleries of the British Museum will reward you with more of these rather vainglorious monuments, of which the Nereid Monument is the largest and most extravagant by a short straw.

Athens imposed strict limits on her citizens with regard to the amount which they could spend on funerals and funerary monuments. The Lycian chieftains knew no such limits and the British Museum owns several of their grand tombs, covered in an astonishing amount of sculpture which was produced by the finest craftsmen of Ancient Greece, as the technique and composition of the work shows. No doubt these artists were lured to Lycia with promises of astronomical transfer fees and salaries, in the style of modern football stars.

The remains of the Nereid Monument were brought to London by Charles Fellows between 1838 and 1842. Because the remains include four sculpted friezes, Fellows at first assumed that he was dealing with the remains of four distinct temples. However, it soon became clear to him that all four friezes in fact belonged to a single monument. This view was confirmed by a team of French archaeologists working on site between 1950 and 1967. The monument also sports a team of Nereids, statues of sea goddesses running over the sea, who stand between the Ionic columns. Again we see an astonishing difference between the extravagance of this Lycian chieftain in his lavishing of decoration on his personal monument and the more discreet charms of the Greeks who used far more restrained decoration on their temples, dedicated to their gods.

Naked Greeks

The Lycian equivalent of Essex Man was not content with extravagant displays of wealth on his showy tomb. He also liked to show off his own achievements when he 'waved his wad'. So we note a major difference in the subject matter of the architectural sculpture of these Lycian tombs and the temples of the gods in Greece. Greek temples always displayed mythological scenes, particularly of battles (apart from the striking exception of the Parthenon Frieze, part of the Athenian propaganda campaign). However, on the Nereid Monument it is possible to interpret many of the scenes on the friezes as part of the incumbent's personal history.

At the base of the monument, below the Ionic columns, run two friezes, one on top of the other. The lower frieze is just over one metre high. It shows a battle between Greeks and barbarians. Both make use of lightly and heavily armed troops, but only the barbarians use cavalry and archers while some of the Greeks fight in the nude. These details are part of the artistic conventions of Greek sculptures. The figures are about 30% smaller than the elegant bodies on the Parthenon Frieze and consequently look a lot squatter. However, this squatness is likely to be far more useful in helping us to form a picture of what ancient Greeks really looked like!

This frieze would not look out of place on a contemporary Greek temple, and indeed the little temple of Athene Nike, on the Athenian Acropolis, displays a very similar battle scene. But here the similarity stops, for the frieze on top of this generalised battle scene is far more specific and seems to show scenes of actual warfare. It includes the siege of a walled city, with a group of soldiers scaling the walls of the besieged city. Elsewhere, we see two old men in civilian robes standing before a man seated on a throne, accompanied by guards and an attendant who holds a sunshade over him. Such specific detail is not part of the conventions of Greek art and almost certainly is a scene from the life of the Lycian chieftain. One would imagine that he is the energetic figure seated on the throne, accepting the surrender of the besieged citizens.

It seems strange that this frieze, which shows a great moment in the life of a warrior, should be smaller than the one below, which represents a conventionally vague battle scene: 62 cm high as compared to 102 cm. Perhaps this indicates a tension between the natural instincts of the Greek sculptors and the whims of their patron. The frieze over the columns shows scenes from the daily life of an aristocratic chieftain. On the front we see him at play, hunting boar and bears. On the sides we have minor battle scenes, involving foot-soldiers and horsemen while on the back a procession of men come bringing gifts such as hares, birds, and smaller objects in baskets and trays.

Inside the colonnade around the actual tomb chamber is a fourth frieze. Again it seems to show the life and times of a Lycian chieftain, including a sacrifice and a banquet.

Honey, I shrunk the family

On the east pediment, over the entrance to the tomb, is a curiously old-fashioned pediment. In the centre are two seated figures, a man and a woman, surely the occupants of the tomb. They are surrounded by standing figures, probably family or attendants. In order to squeeze these figures in under the slope of the pediment, the artist has had to ignore natural proportion and has made them much smaller than the central figures. This is almost certainly a reflection of the social order of the chieftain's household and so may have been acceptable to him. However, such distortion would have seemed grotesque to Greeks.

This distortion of natural size reminds one of early pediments, such as that on the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi. The convention of Greek artists at the end of the fifth century, when the Nereid Monument was built, was to fit figures into the sloping frame by having them crouch, sit, and lie down. This can be seen in the remains of the Parthenon pediment, in the room next to the Nereid Monument. The west pediment is not in such good condition. It shows a group of soldiers, again of sizes varying according to their position in the slope. Their leader is collapsing under the attack of a horseman, but sadly only the hoof of the horse has survived the ravages of time. One assumes that this victorious rider is our Lycian chieftain.

The Nereid Monument takes its name from the female figures standing between the columns. Nereids were minor sea goddesses, daughters of Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea. These goddesses crop up frequently in the *Iliad*, supporting Thetis, the mother of Achilles, whenever she starts bewailing the sad fate of her son. The precise identity of these figures is in fact unsure: they may be breezes. The sculptor has represented the Nereids in long robes which cover them up completely but, at the same time, manage to reveal their anatomy in some detail. These robes are wet, as if with spray, and billow out. This is very much in keeping with artistic conventions of the time, although the spray is a detail not normally found in Greek sculpture.

As if this abundance of sculpture were not enough, there are yet more statues, some of which archaeologists have not as yet been able to put into context. The roof of the Nereid Monument was originally surrounded by naked male youths holding on to female figures. These acroteria figures have the most exposed position on any monument and are therefore particularly vulnerable to the ravages of time. They have survived in poor condition and in the British Museum they are placed next to lovely sculptures of lions, whose original location is not known.

Graeco-Lycian revival in Peckham

The Lycian chieftains clearly had a very lavish taste in monumental masonry. This penchant was shared, in part, by our own Victorian ancestors and there is a tomb which actually emulates and imitates the Lycian monuments in Nunhead Cemetery, in south-east London. John Allan (1790-1865) was a wealthy ship-owner who originated in Whitby, Yorkshire. He set up offices in the City of London and lived in a spacious villa in Deptford. Little detail is known about his life but it is hard to miss his tomb, soaring fifteen feet above the more modest crosses and slabs around it, in one of the most prominent positions in the cemetery.

The shape of the main body of the Allan tomb is modelled on another of the Lycian chieftains' tombs, the tomb of Payava, also from Xanthus, also rescued by Charles Fellows and also displayed in the British Museum. However, not content with imitating just one Lycian tomb, the rather showy sculpture of Allan's monument emulates that of the Nereid Monument. The monumental mason of the Allan monument wisely ignored the carvings of the tomb of Payava. These are of strictly historical interest, showing scenes from the life of this Lycian warrior. The tomb of Payava also boasts lengthy inscriptions in the Lycian language, referring to the military prowess of Payava and his personal involvement in the construction of his monument. Again we find Greek artists working for a Lycian patron, producing compositions to keep him happy in the style of contemporary Greek art.

The Allan monument has two female figures recumbent on its granite vault, in attitudes of deepest mourning. These lifesize marble mourners wear revealing diaphanous robes and are clearly inspired by the Nereids of the Nereid Monument. It is interesting to note, however, the contrast between the despair of these maidens and the bouncing bubbling bliss of the original Nereids. The mourners may be angels but their lack of wings shows the strength of the ideas of the Greek Revival in the mind of this Victorian monumental mason.

On the front of the monument, between the polished granite pillars, is a sculpture of a naked male figure borne up on high by a winged angel. This winged figure could easily be misinterpreted as a Greek figure of victory, a *nike*, were it not for her bodily burden. On the back of this Graeco-Lycian-Christian monument is a Roman touch: a portrait in bronze of John Allan. Even on the tombs of Victorian nabobs such portraits are unusual. We are very near to reaching the threshold of hubris here!

There is clearly a need for some touch of Christian modesty and we find this discreetly tucked away at the foot of the vault. Here, in much smaller lettering than the name of the incumbent, is the only overt sign that this is a Christian burial: the wording 'God is love'.

Why Lycian monuments in Peckham?

One may wonder why John Allan chose to reconstruct these rather obscure Graeco-Lycian tombs rather than a more easily recognisable Parthenon or Pantheon. The answer is fascinating. John Allan's oldest son, also called John Allan, inherited his father's spirit of enterprise. However, his father's wealth meant that he was able to devote himself to travel and archaeology. He was a member of Charles Fellows' team which brought a number of Graeco-Lycian monuments back to Britain, including of course the Nereid Monument and the Payava Tomb. Little wonder then that John Allan senior chose to reconstruct the fruits of his son's searches in the most prestigious part of Nunhead Cemetery, then a new and fashionable necropolis.

Nunhead Cemetery is now extremely overgrown: a mass of trees in the heart of inner-city Peckham. Sculpted angels peer through veils of ivy and John Allan's weeping angels have almost rotted away. But anyone who likes romantic ruins or forest walks would love Nunhead Cemetery: open daily 9 am–5 pm, main entrance on Ivydale Road. Nearest British Rail Station: Nunhead (closed on Sundays) or New Cross Gate.

Cathy Mercer is Head of Classics and Careers at La Retraite School, Clapham Park.